



BONUS SCENE

The Present War

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THE PRESENT WAR

Aaron Marsh

I looked at my sister and watched her every move. We both said we weren't going to get the other a present and while I almost forgot her last year, I didn't this time.

It was surprisingly difficult to come up with a present idea for your twin sister, especially when your hobbies were world apart. I suppose she felt the same way because it was her who suggested we didn't get the other a present.

Clearly, after now twenty-two years with that bundle of depression as my twin sister, I couldn't just *not* get her a present. And if I knew anything about her, she also got me one, despite what she said.

Her eyes were narrowed as she looked at me with anticipation, daring me to pull out a present that she forbade me to get just so she wouldn't be the one to "break the rule".

If I broke first, she would say she knew I'd get her a present, so she had to get me one. But if she broke first, I could use that excuse.

We'd both been living in Manhattan for a couple of weeks now, but we met up at the ice rink back in New City just for old vibes' sake.

The rink was where we grew up. We both learned how to skate here; both found our passions even if mine held way longer than hers did.

I'd been playing for the NHL now, and it had been the worst and best month of my life. While the team was great, I had a tough time adjusting to everything.

Rookies didn't have it easy. Some of the older guys treated us like towel holders, especially older guys on other teams. The ones on my team were more understanding but they were rookies once upon a time as well, so they did a shitshow of helping us make this season less tough on us.

I suppose it was a canon event. It had to happen, if only so we knew what it was like to taste

shit.

“I’ve had better coffee,” Lily said, taking a sip from her iced caramel latte with cold foam or whatever her drink was.

“It’s because you’re not drinking *coffee*.” I looked at the purse she kept strictly on our table. My sister was a little forgetful, especially when it came to her purse. Honestly, I understood why. I, too, would forget my bags everywhere if it wasn’t for Sofia constantly reminding me of everything.

It was a miracle I still had my hockey bag.

“Whatcha got there?” I nodded toward her purse, noticing something mint green sticking out of it.

I hoped it was her present. If I found it before she eventually gave in, I won the unspoken competition.

Lily didn’t even spare her purse a single glance and kept her face straight. “My purse.”

“What’s in it?”

“My stuff.”

My eyes narrowed. “What kind of stuff?”

“Apartment keys, money, my ID, stuff like that.”

She was good, but I was better. “What’s the green thing?”

Lily shrugged. “I don’t see anything green.” Which was true as the purse’s contents faced away from her.

Her purse was slightly opened, which offered me a chance to glance inside. If she had a present for me, surely, it’d be in there.

“So, you’re not hiding anything from me?” I asked.

Lily shook her head. “Whatever do I have to hide?”

Good point. She barely got any privacy this past year, which was for her own good, at least

we thought so. Even if she was hiding something from *me* in particular, Colin would know. Or Sofia. Or just anyone in our circle.

“So if I look, I won’t find anything?”

Lily gestured toward her purse, still unbothered.

At first, I thought she allowed me to check because she figured I wouldn’t, but when instead of a mint green wrapping paper, I found a notebook, I realized this was a trick.

A trick I wasn’t sure I understood just yet.

My breath got caught in my lungs, memories from just a year ago came flooding back. I almost lost my twin sister because I was too shocked to react last year, was too helpless, but not this time.

Though I knew Lily was doing way better mentally than she did a year ago, I wasn’t fully convinced that she didn’t secretly plan another attempt. At least one of us had always been around here this past year. If Colin, Grey, Miles, and I were gone for a couple of days because of hockey, Emory or Sofia watched her closely.

Our first NHL season just started, so there weren’t *too* many times that we were gone, but if we were, Lily had no other choice but to spend that time with Miles and Emory. Or Sofia.

We trusted that she was doing better, and everyone could tell, but we didn’t trust her enough to leave her all by herself just yet.

So, without thinking, I reached for her purse and pulled that stupid notebook out of it.

“Uh, excuse you?” Lily tried to get her book back, but I swatted her hands away and opened the journal instead.

“You’re excused.” I thoroughly read the very first line of the first page, then quickly read the rest to make sure there weren’t some hidden messages somewhere. After that, I just skimmed through some pages.

Turned out, it was just a normal diary. As far as I could tell, there were still some bad

thoughts in there, but it looked a *whole* lot better than the shit I read last time.

When I looked up and awkwardly slid the notebook over the table to my sister, all Lily really did was smile at me weakly.

She knew I was acting out of fear and because I cared about her, which meant she couldn't be mad at me. I guess she'd gotten used to everyone worrying about her, or at least she tried to get used to it.

Still. "I'm sorry," I said honestly. Not once in my life was I even interested in reading my sister's diary. Sure, when we were younger, I'd occasionally tease her about doing it and then tell all her crushes about her feelings for them, but I never did.

"It's okay." Her voice was quieter this time, sadder. "I think Colin would tell you if it's gotten worse again."

I nodded, though I didn't agree. He kept it from me last time, and he couldn't have known I knew anyway. When it came to Lily, I was convinced he'd hide everything from me. That guy would quite literally run in front of a bus for her.

Hell, he'd quit hockey if Lily asked him to.

To be completely fair, I'd do the same for Sofia. If she suddenly wanted to move back to Germany, I'd have my bags packed in a second.

I'd do anything for my girlfriend, and soon-to-be wife. We weren't engaged... officially anyway. Sofia and I knew there was no going back for us. We'd either die together or not at all.

"Do you let him read it?" I asked. "Every time, I mean,"

Lily nodded. "He says he trusts me that I'd tell him when something's wrong, but I notice that he gets nervous every time he has to leave me all by myself. And on days when it's not just rainbows, he's very... well, Colin. It helps when he can read what I wrote down for that day."

He gave her space, I knew that.

Like when she wanted to take a shower, or just needed a bit of time to herself, he'd give her

that. But we never left her unsupervised. Someone was *always* with her. If not the same room, then at least the same apartment.

“It doesn’t annoy you?” Personally, I’d let Sofia read my diary as well if I had one, but I wasn’t sure it wouldn’t annoy me. Diaries are super personal. They’re filled with someone’s deepest thoughts and feelings.

Giving someone else access to my thoughts, especially on bad days, sounded like a nightmare to me.

My sister shrugged. “It’s better that way, isn’t it? For now, at least. I don’t want to go back there, Aaron, so if not being allowed to keep a single thought to myself helps me stay away from that hole, then so be it.” Tears swelled in her eyes. “It’s not ideal, I know that. And as much as I wish I had a little more privacy if for now, each of you having their eyes on me twenty-four hours a day makes *you* feel better, then that’s okay with me. I understand that it’s scary for you guys, that you’re afraid I’ll just disappear. So, until—”

I already shook my head before she could finish her sentence. “You think we should have more faith in you than we do, don’t you?”

Her lips formed a thin line. “Well, yes and no.”

“Yes and no?”

“I understand you’re cautious with me, and I understand that you worry a lot, but I do think I should be allowed to spend a weekend all by myself in *my* apartment every once in a while. And if I end up having bad thoughts, it’s not like Sofia or Miles and Emory are far away.”

I took a sip from my coffee to really think about it before I replied. “You’re right,” I said. “We can’t project our fear of losing you on you. That’s not fair.”

And it wasn’t.

Lily never once complained about anything. She didn’t tell us she wanted more privacy, which, frankly, we should’ve just *known* she’d want. If she ever told Colin, I didn’t know, but

if she had mentioned it to him, Colin would've done everything to give Lily more privacy even if that meant he was more anxious for a little while.

He was probably her biggest supporter, had the most faith in her. Always. Even if Lily didn't believe in herself, he did.

Not once in my life did I think I'd ever be okay with any guy Lily was dating, but god was I thankful my own best friend fell hopelessly in love with her. Personally, I didn't understand how *Lily* fell for *him*, but whatever.

But anyway, it was still our birthday so there was no space for sadness.

"Is Colin picking you up?" I asked. We drove here together, but Lily knew I was meeting up with Sofia at one because she wanted to take me somewhere for my birthday.

"Kind of," she answered. "We're going to the Retro Diner. I'll just assume he'll take me back home after that."

"Would be stupid if he didn't." I mean, they *lived* together.

Still kind of crazy.

A year ago, I was living with Colin in our shared house near St. Trewery University. Every day was like a mini party. We were drunk almost *every* weekend.

Then also, on *this* very day a year ago, Sofia came back after thirteen years. She didn't know that but the moment I saw her again, something inside of me just knew. I didn't recognize her at first, but in my defense, the last time I'd seen her was when she was still seven, and she was a fully grown adult now.

God, I've never loved anyone more than I did her. My little icicle.

Now, we were all living in the same building, having separate lives with our significant others—minus Grey. He was as single as ever; fucking puck bunnies from left to right, having bar-hookups.

He met someone though... kind of? He definitely talked more to Miles than to Colin and

me, which was quite offensive if I was being honest. How dare he speak to Miles about guys and not to me? I could give great advice, too.

“Are we not... celebrating together?” Lily asked.

We did last year in some ways.

“I don’t think so. Did you invite anyone?”

Lily shook her head. “I kind of just figured you would throw this huge party and then I’d just be there.”

“My guests wouldn’t have gotten you any presents.”

“So? I don’t want any presents. Besides, I would get enough from *our* friends.” Once again, her eyes narrowed at me. Guess our game continued.

“Yes, our *friends*. Not from me because we said no presents this year.”

“Exactly.”

For a solid minute, Lily just looked into my eyes. I wasn’t even sure she blinked. Her face didn’t move, hell, she probably wasn’t even breathing. She just stared at me, waiting for me to cave.

The entire Café was silent, to anyway. I was sure there was loud chatter all around us, but in order not to lose whatever Lily was doing right now, I blocked out every single noise.

Unfortunately, the silence was deafening and I had no other choice but to give in.

“I hope Miles and Grey are throwing *me* a surprise party,” I said, killing the silence between us.

“And I hope Sofia and Emory throwing me one.”

“Sofia would throw one for *me*. I’m her boyfriend.”

“And I’m her *best* friend,” she said. “Boyfriends come and go, but best friends are forever.”

I highly disagreed, but I wasn’t going to break my sister’s already fragile heart. Before Sofia and I ever broke up, the world was going down.

“So, you’re saying *your boyfriend* would rather throw me a party than you? I mean, that’s your logic, isn’t it?”

Lily shook her head. “Nah, Colin only throws parties for those who deserve one. You don’t.”

My eyebrows shot up. “And why don’t I?”

She looked at her nails, which she told me earlier were freshly done, whatever that meant. Then she looked back up, humming. “It just means that he would never tolerate someone who was being mean to me.”

“Mean to—” I gasped. When was I mean to her? Sure, she was my sister, so I had the *duty* to annoy her, but I was never *mean*. “When was I *ever* mean to you?”

“You’re being mean right now.” Her eyes fell toward the tote bag beside me, and at that very moment, I knew I lost.

Sighing in defeat, I reached for the tote bag and pulled out a green-wrapped box. The wrapping paper had little frogs on them. Colin suggested it to *everyone*. Suggested was too nice of a word, he *forced* us all to use it because it would make Lily happy.

My only other option was parchment paper.

As I handed Lily her gift, I noticed the bright grin on her face that called me a loser. Losing to a sibling was already bad, now try losing to your *twin*.

And I was the older one!

I’d never live that down ever again.

“We said no presents!” Yet she snatched that present from my hands like I’d never given her one before.

My blank face didn’t waver, even when Lily was very clearly laughing at me for being the weaker twin and losing at something as easy as keeping a present hidden.

“I knew I was your favorite sister, but, dude, no present means no present.” Her eyes rolled, a smile still on her lips. “Not everyone can be the superior twin though, so I’m glad you admit

to being the dumber one all on your own.”

A heavy breath spiraled out of my lungs. “Like you didn’t get me a present.”

Lily’s grin turned into something devilish. “Of course I did, but only because I knew you’d break the rule and…”

As I said, she used the ultimate excuse against me, and I would never be able to turn it around. No matter what I said or did, I’d stay the one who broke the promise.

